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## Asserting Eternal Providence: Theodicy in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

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On the last occasion when I had the good fortune to read E. R. Dodds' famous essay, "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*",<sup>1</sup> I felt certain misgivings at some of his conclusions. Dodds, it will be remembered, is denouncing a view that he discovered in some undergraduate essays on the question, "In what sense, if in any, does the *Oedipus Rex* attempt to justify the ways of God to man?" The offending view<sup>2</sup> holds that "we get what we deserve,"<sup>3</sup> that is, that Oedipus in some measure merits his suffering. Dodds' position in answer to this has an ethical aspect (Oedipus has an "essential moral innocence"<sup>4</sup>), a religious one (Sophocles' "gods are [not] in any human sense just"<sup>5</sup>) and a literary-critical one ("there is no reason at all why we should require a dramatist—even a Greek dramatist—to be for ever running about delivering banal 'messages'"<sup>6</sup>). Many have anticipated Dodds

<sup>1</sup> E. R. Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*," *G&R* 13 (1966) 37–49 = *The Ancient Concept of Progress* (Oxford 1973) 64–77, cited henceforth as Dodds. The article has been cited frequently and anthologised at least twice, in M. J. O'Brien (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Oedipus Rex* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1968) 17–29 and H. Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Sophocles' Oedipus Rex* (New York 1988) 35–47.

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<sup>2</sup> Dodds identifies and refutes two further views (that the *OT* is a tragedy of fate and that Sophocles, as a pure artist, does not concern himself with morality or religion at all), which, since they are mutually exclusive of the view I support, I join him in rejecting.

<sup>3</sup> Dodds 37 = 64.

<sup>4</sup> Dodds 42 = 69.

<sup>5</sup> Dodds 47 = 75.

<sup>6</sup> Dodds 45 = 73. Dodds holds a similar view of Aesch. *Eum.*; he wrote in "Morals and Politics in the *Oresteia*," in *The Ancient Concept of Progress* (above, note 1) 47–48: "Nearly everyone agrees . . . that there is a political point here; but after a century of controversy there is still no agreement on what the point is. I believe myself that this is

in his position<sup>7</sup> and others have followed him,<sup>8</sup> with very few dissenting.<sup>9</sup> This position is consonant with the emotional reaction of anyone watching or reading the play. Our sympathies are with Oedipus: We feel terror and pity at his plight and this makes us want him to be innocent and his persecutor, Apollo, to be unaccountably vicious. This emotional reaction is important, because Greek tragedy is an emotional medium.<sup>10</sup>

Tragedy is also, however, an intellectual art-form and the intellectual clarification of the concepts of terror and pity is arguably as much a part of tragic catharsis as is any psychological purgation through terror and pity.<sup>11</sup> As well as feeling for Oedipus, we must analyze his situation. Texts contemporary with Sophocles suggest that, while feeling about the play much as we do, many members of its original audience would have questioned Dodds' analysis. Oedipus has no essence beyond what we can infer from the deeds that he performs and, of these, Sophocles' contemporaries will have found some morally innocent and others not. Apollo's actions, meanwhile, will have seemed to them to be just in an all-too-human sense. The present article is devoted to the analysis of the roles of Oedipus and Apollo in the play along lines suggested by fifth-century thought.

# I

Beyond doubt, Oedipus suffers greatly in Sophocles' play. He has been living in a state of incest and he blinds himself in order to be unable to see the children conceived in pollution (lines 1273-74, 1369-90). He is undoubtedly not responsible for his incest and the pain that he experiences is innocent suffering. The presence of this innocent suffering explains our sympathy for his actions, but should not cloud our analysis of them.

If there is any additional suffering that Oedipus has merited, it must be because he has done something. He is not likely punished for a character-

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exactly what the poet would have wished: he was writing a political play, yes; but a propagandist play, no."

<sup>7</sup> Of these, Dodds mentions (38 = 65) especially U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, "Excursus zum Oedipus des Sophokles," *Hermes* 34 (1899) 55-80 = *Kleine Schriften* VI 209-33. He also (42 = 69) sees similarities between his view and those of Whitman, Waldo, Letters, Ehrenberg, Knox and Kirkwood.

<sup>8</sup> R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 203, and R. D. Dawe, *Sophocles. Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge 1982) 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> The view that Oedipus is guilty is expressed by P. H. Vellacott, "The Guilt of Oedipus," *G&R* 11 (1964) 137-48, and A. Cameron, *The Identity of Oedipus the King* (New York 1968) 133.

<sup>10</sup> See W. B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions* (London 1983), who cites bibliography at 174-76, to which add M. M. Kokolakis, "Greek Drama: the Stirring of Pity," in J. H. Betts et al. (edd.), *Studies in Honour of T. B. L. Webster* I (Bristol 1986) 170-78, and M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London 1987) 5-36.

<sup>11</sup> L. Golden, "The Clarification Theory of *Katharsis*," *Hermes* 104 (1976) 437-52.

flaw,<sup>12</sup> because not all tragic heroes suffer a *hamartia*, which is in any case more likely an ignorance of fact than a moral flaw,<sup>13</sup> and because actions and not character-traits cause things to happen in Greek tragedy.<sup>14</sup>

Oedipus does only one thing on stage: He "pursue[s] the truth at whatever personal cost," and "accept[s] and endure[s] it when found."<sup>15</sup> This is shown by the moment (1170) when he pauses in his course of action, having realized its implications, and chooses to follow Delphi's command and implicate himself by pursuing the truth. This moment recalls that in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (899–903) where Orestes pauses briefly and then immediately chooses to follow Delphi's command and kill his mother. But this very self-prosecution points backward in condemnation to an earlier act, namely Oedipus' murder of his father Laius.

The murder of Laius might justify part of Oedipus' suffering, since it is a deed and not a character-flaw and since it not only precedes but also paves the way for his suffering.<sup>16</sup> Laius' death makes Jocasta a widow, and so enables Oedipus to marry her<sup>17</sup> and reside in Thebes; the residence of the regicide in Thebes, in turn, causes the plague (106–07) that sets in motion the plot. Still, small causes can provoke disproportionately large effects and our question remains.

The crime of parricide has two components: homicide and father-abuse. The play enforces this distinction: The quests for Laius' killer and for Oedipus' father remain separate for most of it, not merging until the recognition-scene (1182–85). Let us examine the crime under these two headings, beginning by considering the murder of Laius in the context of fifth-century Athenian law. This is relevant, given Greek tragedy's tendency to anachronism,<sup>18</sup> the audience's familiarity with the Athenian judicial

<sup>12</sup> Dodds 38–39 = 66.

<sup>13</sup> On this question, see especially J. M. Bremer, *Hamartia* (Amsterdam 1969), T. C. W. Stinton, "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy," *CQ* 25 (1975) 221–54 = *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1990) 143–85, and S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London 1986) 202–37.

<sup>14</sup> On the general preference for plot over character, see S. Goldhill, "Character and Action, Representation and Reading: Greek Tragedy and its Critics," in C. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1990) 100–27, who cites bibliography at 111 n. 32. On character in Sophocles, see P. E. Easterling, "Character in Sophocles," *G&R* 24 (1977) 121–29.

<sup>15</sup> Dodds 48 = 76.

<sup>16</sup> Dodds 39 = 66.

<sup>17</sup> There are no grounds on which to assess Oedipus' guilt or innocence in the case of his incest, for incest was not formally illegal at Athens; see A. R. W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens I: The Family and Property* (Oxford 1968) 22 n. 3, and M. Broadbent, *Studies in Greek Genealogy* (Leiden 1968) 155. This is of little moment, since incest is obviously a violation of motherhood, which the Greeks held in high esteem (see A. H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus. Eumenides* [Cambridge 1989] ad 657–66) and apparently constituted a pollution (R. Parker, *Miasma* [Oxford 1983] 97–98).

<sup>18</sup> B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley 1964) 58–59, P. E. Easterling, "Anachronism in Greek Tragedy," *JHS* 105 (1985) 1–10.

apparatus and the probability that the play draws heavily for its structure on the process of judicial inquiry.<sup>19</sup>

Classical Athenian jurisprudence recognizes three kinds of killing<sup>20</sup> and different scholars have classified Laius' murder under all three. The first is the unintentional killing of an innocent victim (what we would call "manslaughter"). The hero of *Oedipus at Colonus* claims unintentionality to defend himself from the charge of parricide (273, 547–48, 988–99). Yet if Oedipus did not know that Laius was his father, he knew that he was a human being and that his act was homicide, in contrast to Deianira who could (but, interestingly, does not) plead unintentional killing, having administered a poison believing it to be a love-potion.

The second kind is justified homicide (which has no equivalent in American jurisprudence), which is the intentional killing of a criminal caught in the act. The best-known example is the killing of an adulterer apprehended *in flagrante delicto*,<sup>21</sup> but another is the killing of a highwayman caught red-handed.<sup>22</sup> Oedipus does not claim to have thought that Laius was a robber.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, according to the admittedly none-too-factual report of Laius' surviving slave, Laius and company suspected Oedipus of intending to rob them (122), as he does in Euripides' version.<sup>24</sup>

The third kind is intentional homicide (ordinary murder). Self-defense<sup>25</sup> was a mitigating circumstance in a case of intentional homicide, rather than grounds for lawful homicide.<sup>26</sup> Demosthenes (21. 71–75) tells how a certain Euaeon, who killed a man in retaliation for a single blow, was convicted by one vote. This case shows that, despite the considerable sympathy that the jury obviously felt for the killer, "the mere fact that the victim struck the first blow was not sufficient to acquit the killer."<sup>27</sup> One must show that the victim intended to kill the murderer. Yet Oedipus does not argue self-defense,<sup>28</sup> claiming, as he would have to do, that Laius was

<sup>19</sup> R. Garner, *Law and Society in Classical Athens* (London 1987) 103–04, and R. G. Lewis, "The Procedural Basis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *GRBS* 30 (1989) 41–66; cf. G. Greiffenhagen, "Der Prozess des Ödipus," *Hermes* 94 (1966) 147–76.

<sup>20</sup> See D. M. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (London 1978) 113–18.

<sup>21</sup> I.e. ἐπ' αὐτοφώρῳ, e.g. Lys. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ἐν ὁδῷ καθελόν, Dem. 23. 53; cf. Aeschin. 1. 91.

<sup>23</sup> M. Gagarin, "Self-Defense in Athenian Homicide Law," *GRBS* 19 (1978) 111–20, at 118 n. 32, pace Wilamowitz (above, note 7) 55 = 209.

<sup>24</sup> Eur. *Phoen.* 44–45. Even in Euripides' version the robbery is incidental to the murder and is not the motive for it.

<sup>25</sup> Ἀμυνόμενος ἄρχοντα χειρῶν ἀδίκων, Lys. 4. 11, Dem. 23. 50, 47. 7, Isoc. 20. 1, Pl. *Leg.* 869d, Arist. *Rhet.* 2. 24. 9 (= 1402a), Apollod. *Bibl.* 2. 4. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Gagarin (above, note 23) passim.

<sup>27</sup> Gagarin (above, note 23) 117.

<sup>28</sup> As is claimed by Wilamowitz (above, note 7) 55 = 209, J. T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1920) xxix, and C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 165.

about to kill him,<sup>29</sup> stating in fact that on this occasion<sup>30</sup> Laius wanted only to drive him from the road (805). Moreover, according to Plato (*Leg.* 869b)—who may or may not be reflecting Attic law—parent-murder is the only crime in which self-defense is not an extenuating circumstance.

One might suppose that Oedipus' act was a third-degree murder, since he acted without malice aforethought (807),<sup>31</sup> and that he was guilty of something less than premeditated homicide, but this claim would ignore fifth-century Attic law, which reserves no special category for homicide that is intentional but unpremeditated. "[T]he Athenians used [the terms] 'unpremeditated' and 'unintentional' interchangeably . . . [T]he practical effect of this was to narrow unintentional homicides to our category of accidental killings. This meant that all other killings were classified as intentional and were subject to the severest penalties. Sudden killings thus received no more lenient treatment than any other intentional killings unless some justification such as self-defence could be shown"<sup>32</sup> (which in Oedipus' case, as we have seen, it could not).

Again, one might argue that, whatever the judgement of a hypothetical fifth-century court, the heroic society in which Oedipus is imagined as having lived would have "acquitted" him. Not so. In Homer and Hesiod a murderer faces one of three penalties. He may either be killed by the victim's family,<sup>33</sup> or go into exile,<sup>34</sup> or offer monetary compensation.<sup>35</sup> Only two of the murders mentioned in epic are not followed by such an atonement: One is the murder of Laius; the other is Heracles' murder of Iphitus.<sup>36</sup> When Sophocles recounts the latter (*Trach.* 38, 270–79) he supplies the penalty, exile, that is missing in Homer's account. Given Sophocles' supplement to this story, Oedipus stands alone among epic murderers<sup>37</sup> in escaping human retribution. We do not know why this is so

<sup>29</sup> Not even in the *OC* does he make this claim explicitly, although he says παθὼν μὲν ἀντέδρων (271), which implies reciprocity. Mekler's emendation (accepted by Jebb) at 547, καὶ γὰρ ἄν, οὗς ἐφόνευσ' ἔμ' ἀπώλεσαν, has Laius intent on murder, but the MSS read καὶ γὰρ ἄλλους ἐφόνευσα κάπωλεσα, which is capable of a wide variety of reconstructions, of which Mekler's is by no means the most obvious.

<sup>30</sup> For Laius had, of course, wanted to kill him when he exposed him years before, a point to which we shall return.

<sup>31</sup> Δι' ὀργῆς. This is but the last occurrence of ὀργή and related words in the play, the others being at 335, 337, 339, 344, 345, 364, 405 and 524.

<sup>32</sup> W. T. Loomis, "The Nature of Premeditation in Athenian Homicide Law," *JHS* 92 (1972) 86–95, at 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Od.* 1. 35–43, 3. 309–10, 11. 422–30.

<sup>34</sup> *Il.* 2. 661–70, 13. 694–97, 15. 431–39, 16. 572–76, 23. 85–90, 24. 480–83, *Od.* 13. 259–75, 14. 380–81, 15. 271–82, [Hes.] *Aspis* 9–19, 80–85, Hes. fr. 257 Merkelbach–West.

<sup>35</sup> Ποινή: *Il.* 9. 633, 18. 497–508.

<sup>36</sup> Laius: *Od.* 11. 271–80; Iphitus: *Od.* 21. 24–30.

<sup>37</sup> There are other murderers known to Greek myth as we find it in Apollodorus who make no compensation or purification for murder and these are listed by Parker (above, note 17) 375, sections 2 and 3.

in the epics, but Sophocles supplies an explanation: The Thebans were too distracted by the Sphinx to investigate the murder and try the killer (130–31). Although postponed by the Sphinx, punishment was as fitting for Laius' killer as for any other. This is why the oracle orders the murderer's exile (98) and why Oedipus pronounces this sentence upon him (236–43).

The audience's appreciation of Oedipus' act was conditioned by the precepts of ancient Greek popular morality.<sup>38</sup> For example, Laius' murder occurred at a crossroads (716, 730, 733, 800–01), an important fact since it is a constant in the myth, while the precise location is variable.<sup>39</sup> The crossroads is a place where a decision must be made, as in the story of the choice of Heracles.<sup>40</sup> As in that story, the alternatives confronting Oedipus were as much moral as directional: By turning one way, he would kill four strangers; either by retreating (an option available to Oedipus, but not to Heracles) or by deviating temporarily from his chosen path, he would spare them.

Three considerations make clear the judgement that morality passes upon these alternatives. Firstly, since Laius was trying to push Oedipus from the road (804–05), which was narrow (1399), and since there was another path available, one party should step aside. According to Homer (*Il.* 9. 69, 160–61), one should yield to the kinglier, that is, to him who commands more men,<sup>41</sup> and to the elder. The old might defer to the young of higher rank, but with both age and rank<sup>42</sup> on his side one would expect deference and try to exact it if not forthcoming. Laius (a king) is actually kinglier than Oedipus (a king's son) and obviously so, travelling in a mule-car (753, 803)<sup>43</sup> with a retinue, while Oedipus goes alone on foot.<sup>44</sup> In the

<sup>38</sup> I shall henceforth use the term "morality" as a shorthand for "ancient Greek popular morality."

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Aesch. fr. 387a Radt. On this fragment, see G. O. Hutchinson, *Aeschylus. Septem Contra Thebas* (Oxford 1985) xix–xx. The crossroads (of unspecified location) are mentioned again in Sen. *Oed.* 278, 772.

<sup>40</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 11. 38, Theogn. 911–12, Prodicus apud Xen. *Mem.* 2. 1. 21–34 (= 84 B 2 Diels–Kranz), Hdt. 1. 11. 2, Pl. *Leg.* 799c. Beyond its empirical demonstrability, recent readers of the play are reminded of this fact by the commentary of Dawe (above, note 8) 3, a scholar scarcely given to rash interpretative conjecture. See, too, S. Halliwell, "Where Three Roads Meet: A Neglected Detail in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *JHS* 106 (1986) 187–90, at 189.

<sup>41</sup> Agamemnon, of whom the word βασιλεύτερος is used in comparison with Achilles, commands one hundred ships to Achilles' fifty (*Il.* 2. 576, 685). See R. Drews, *Basileus* (New Haven 1983), A. G. Geddes, "Who's Who in 'Homeric' Society?," *CQ* 34 (1984) 17–36, esp. 28–36, and T. Rihill, "Kings and Commoners in Homeric Society," *LCM* 11 (1986) 89–91.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. *Od.* 2. 14, Tyrt. fr. 12. 37 West, Theogn. 935–36.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to its usefulness for cartage, an ἀπήνη is the appropriate vehicle for conveyance on a ceremonial occasion; see H. L. Lorimer, "The Country Cart of Ancient Greece," *JHS* 23 (1903) 132–51, esp. 136–37. Nor is it merely the tool of rustics: A ἄμαξα drawn by mules was not beneath Priam's dignity (*Il.* 24. 266–74) and the ἀπήνη

parallel incident in the *Iliad* (1. 188–92), when Achilles is provoked by Agamemnon, who is both kinglier and elder, he contemplates homicide, revealing that the course actually chosen by Oedipus is not unnatural, but then wisely abstains from violence. Laius was also clearly older than Oedipus, for his hair was “a sable silver’d” (742) and Oedipus calls him “elder” (805, 807), not necessarily an old man, but a senior figure<sup>45</sup> deserving of respect. Oedipus should not have quarrelled with Laius, not because he might be his father,<sup>46</sup> but because morality demanded respect for elders.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, Laius was a stranger (813), whom it is wrong to kill,<sup>48</sup> for “all strangers are in the keeping of Zeus” (*Od.* 6. 207–08 = 14. 57–58) in his capacity as Zeus of Strangers.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, some may even be Zeus incognito.<sup>50</sup> These beliefs are grounded in social reality: The stranger lacks brotherhood, law and hearth (*Il.* 9. 63) and is very vulnerable. To limit this vulnerability and prevent a breakdown of society, the Greeks ritualized the behaviour proper toward strangers. When a stranger presents himself at one’s house, he must be entertained no matter how inconvenient (cf. Eur. *Alc.* 476 ff.). Even in battle one should not attack a man of unknown identity lest he be a god.<sup>51</sup> The proper behaviour of strangers meeting as wayfarers is shown in the *Iliad*, where Priam, the old man, travelling away from home with his herald encounters the unrecognized young man, his surrogate son, who is Hermes in disguise, and whom he suspects of being a brigand.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to Oedipus, Hermes is a paragon of courtesy.<sup>53</sup> To

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was used as a vehicle for competition in the Olympic games (cf. Pind. *Ol.* 5, 6). Contrast the Near Eastern attitude to the mule as shown by Zechariah 9. 9 and Matthew 21. 5.

<sup>44</sup> The king has naturally undertaken a mission to Delphi himself, rather than delegating it; cf. Pind. *Ol.* 6. 37–38. No motive for the mission is given or necessary in the play.

<sup>45</sup> Dawe (above, note 8) ad 805.

<sup>46</sup> As Vellacott (above, note 9) 140 argues.

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Ar. *Nub.* 993, Pl. *Resp.* 412c, 465a, Xen. *Rep. Lac.* 2. 10.

<sup>48</sup> See J. Gould, “Hiketeia,” *JHS* 93 (1973) 74–103, at 90–94.

<sup>49</sup> *Il.* 13. 624–25, *Od.* 9. 270–71, 14. 283–84. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA 1985) 130.

<sup>50</sup> *Od.* 17. 483–87, *Ov. Met.* 1. 212–13, 8. 611–724; cf. Acts 14. 12. A. S. Hollis, *Ovid. Metamorphoses Book VIII* (Oxford 1970) 108–09 and *Callimachus. Hecale* (Oxford 1990) 341–54.

<sup>51</sup> *Il.* 6. 119–236. This is a special case, since Glaucus and Diomedes are connected by earlier ties of family; but then so too were Oedipus and Laius, if they had only bothered to stop and find this out.

<sup>52</sup> Old man: γέρων *Il.* 24. 358, 361, 368, like the πρέσβυς Laius, *OT* 805, 807; travelling away from home: *Il.* 24. 481; herald: *Il.* 24. 282, 352, again like Laius, *OT* 753; young man: κοῦρος *Il.* 24. 347; son: *Il.* 24. 362, 371 with C. W. MacLeod’s note (*Homer. Iliad XXIV* [Cambridge 1982] ad 362, “Hermes becomes something like Hector to Priam, both as his defender and as his good ‘son’”); cf. Oedipus’ unrecognized filiation; brigand: *Il.* 24. 355–57, like Oedipus, *OT* 122.

<sup>53</sup> The particular relevance of this story to my argument was pointed out to me by Emmet Robbins.

murder strangers is extreme barbarity, fit for Laestrygonians or Cyclopes, each of whom is a law to himself and cares nothing for others (*Od.* 9. 112–15), but unthinkable to a civilized Greek. Of potentially ironic application to Oedipus is Hesiod's observation (*Op.* 327–32) that whoever harms a stranger is as bad as a father-abuser.

Thirdly, Laius was accompanied by a herald (753), recognizable as such (802), presumably through his caduceus.<sup>54</sup> The herald accompanied him because he was an "envoy sent to consult the oracle"<sup>55</sup> (114) on official religious and state business. Oedipus at first "[forebore] to strike the sacred herald"<sup>56</sup>—whom he does eventually kill—because heralds are inviolable.<sup>57</sup> To violate their rights was "sacrilegious";<sup>58</sup> to kill them was to break the customs of all men.<sup>59</sup> Herodotus (7. 133–37) tells how the Spartans killed Dareius' heralds and were incited by the hero Talthybius, in life the herald of Agamemnon, to send men to Xerxes to die to expiate the crime. Xerxes refused to act illegally like the Spartans; yet, although he spared them, their sons later died, Herodotus editorializes, in requital for Talthybius' wrath. Once, whenever Athenian youths assembled they wore mourning for the herald Copeus whom the Athenians had killed (Philostr. *VS* 2. 1. 5 = 2. 59 Kayser). An Athenian herald murdered by the Megarians was buried with full honours at the Dipylon gate while his murder caused enmity between the two states.<sup>60</sup>

Three arguments, all inadequate, might be raised in Oedipus' favour. The first is that he did not choose to kill Laius because, unlike Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia (Aesch. *Ag.* 206–17), his deliberation is not reported. Lacking on his lips is "the characteristic cry of the tragic hero,"<sup>61</sup> "What should I do?"<sup>62</sup> Yet this is a feature of his character, not of his situation. The only one to hesitate in our play is Creon (91–92, 1443);

<sup>54</sup> So R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles. Oedipus Tyrannus*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1887) ad 804–12.

<sup>55</sup> See C. P. Bill, "Notes on the Greek *θεωρός* and *θεωρία*," *TAPA* 32 (1901) 196–204.

<sup>56</sup> Jebb (above, note 54) ad 804–12.

<sup>57</sup> See L. M. Wéry, "Le meurtre des hérauts de Darius en 491 et l'inviolabilité du héraut," *AC* 35 (1966) 468–86. The relevance of this evidence to the case of Oedipus has been noted by A. D. Fitton Brown in a review of W.-H. Friedrich, *Vorbild und Neugestaltung*, *CR* 19 (1969) 307–09, at 308.

<sup>58</sup> Ἀσεβής, Dem. 12. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Hdt. 7. 136. 2. A Euripidean chorus cries *μη πρὸς θεῶν κήρυκα τολμήσης θενεῖν*, *Heracr.* 271.

<sup>60</sup> Plut. *Per.* 30. 3, Dem. 12. 4. Oedipus, who killed a man engaged in a *theoria*, will easily insult a seer (386–89; cf. his insulting of the Pythia, 964–65), since that is a relatively common form of disrespect for the gods' servants (cf. *Il.* 1. 106, 12. 231–50, *Soph. Ant.* 1033–38).

<sup>61</sup> A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus. Choephoroi* (Oxford 1986) ad 899.

<sup>62</sup> Τι δρᾶσω; Aesch. *Cho.* 899, *Soph. Phil.* 908, *Eur. Alc.* 380; cf. Aesch. *Suppl.* 379–80, *Ag.* 206–07, *Soph. Aj.* 457, Hdt. 1. 11. 3–4, *Eur. Med.* 502, *Ar. Vesp.* 319a (paratragic). See further R. L. Fowler, "The Rhetoric of Desperation," *HSCP* 91 (1987) 5–38.



Oedipus is full of Sophoclean self-assurance, impatient at others' slowness (74, 287, 1162) and always quick to jump to a suspicion (124–25, 139–40, 380–89). More quick-witted than Agamemnon, he will not laboriously deliberate before choosing the wrong course; it is his particular glory to rush "with characteristic decisiveness"<sup>63</sup> into actions whose outcome is ruinous.

Secondly, Oedipus was provoked. Laius was rude to him and seems by nature to share his temperament as well as his looks (743), as we would expect of kings, who laid great store by heredity.<sup>64</sup> Morality, far from counselling one to turn the other cheek, commands vengeance: Helping friends and harming enemies is the oft-cited recipe for justice.<sup>65</sup> Still, the vengeance exacted by Oedipus exceeds the wrong done. Oedipus says, "[Laius] paid no equal penalty" (810),<sup>66</sup> a phrase reminiscent of the herald in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (532–33), who says that the Trojans "do not boast that they wrought more than they suffered." This reminiscence is ominous in view of the consequences that Agamemnon's excessive vengeance had for him. Of course, in all self-defense killings the victim gets more than he gave,<sup>67</sup> but this is only because he is less successful; in terms of intent the acts are equal, with one killing in order to avoid being killed. Yet by Oedipus' own admission Laius only sought to remove him from the road (804–05). On this point again morality suggests that the vengeance should fit the offense, being equal to instead of greater than the crime,<sup>68</sup> a principle enunciated by Antigone (Soph. *Ant.* 927–28). If equality of retribution was not an absolute standard of morality, the Greeks were at least sensitive to the problems inherent in excessive retaliation (cf. Soph. fr. 589 Radt). This is clear in the present passage where the escalating violence spirals rapidly out of control: Laius and his servant drive Oedipus away, perhaps using only words (804–05); Oedipus responds with a blow, evidently of his fist (806–07); Laius is then the first to use a weapon, coming down upon Oedipus' head with an ox-goad (807–09); Oedipus finally kills them all with a deadlier weapon, his staff (811–13).

Why, then, mention the provocation at all? (It is not in earlier or later accounts.<sup>69</sup>) The reason is that neither here nor anywhere else did Sophocles

<sup>63</sup> Bowra (above, note 28) 190.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Neoptolemus in Soph. *Phil.*, who shares the nature of the father he has never known.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. *Ant.* 641–44. M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge 1989) 26–59.

<sup>66</sup> Οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτεισεν. Thus Bowra (above, note 28) 164 is wrong to say, "Laius was the aggressor and got what he deserved"; by Oedipus' own admission he got *more* than he deserved.

<sup>67</sup> Gagarin (above, note 23) 118 n. 32.

<sup>68</sup> ἴσα πρὸς ἴσα, Hdt. 1. 2. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Earlier accounts: *Od.* 11. 273, *Pind. Ol.* 2. 38–39; later accounts: cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 37–44, in which Oedipus is provoked, but not by Laius.

portray an irredeemably evil man. Faced with a dilemma, he chooses a crime that he would never have gone out of his way to commit.

Thirdly, it will be argued that no one censures Oedipus for murder as murder (as distinct from regicide and parricide). On a strict application of the principle that what is not mentioned in the play does not exist (schol. *Il.* 5. 385d), such censure must be impossible. The answer to this lies in the play's structure. The rapid movement of the play between two distinct questions, the public one of who killed Laius (106–07) and the private worry of Oedipus over his parents' identity (437, 779–93, 1017), allows no time for the identity of Oedipus' victims to be raised in its own right. If a third question arises at all it is the red herring of whether one can foreknow the future (720–22, 945–49, 981–82). Oedipus reveals to Jocasta and the audience his past, apparently for the first time,<sup>70</sup> only when the play is half over (813), and in the context of the distracting search for Laius' killer.

If Oedipus chose to kill the old man and his act was no mere accident or reflex, what was his motive? None is explicit in the text, which gives an account remarkable for its succinctness (813); we must infer one from Oedipus' character.<sup>71</sup> Oedipus, exemplary in so many respects, is led to his crime because he has the Sophoclean hero's impulsive incapacity to yield,<sup>72</sup> as when he ignores the pleas of his wife and herdsman to stop his investigation (1060–61, 1165).<sup>73</sup> Read this trait as hubris<sup>74</sup> or heroism; it keeps him from yielding to the old man and thence leads him to murder. "Character is destiny."<sup>75</sup>

If Oedipus is unquestionably guilty of murder, we must turn to the question of whether he is guilty of the other component of parricide, harming his father. Oedipus does harm his father and this was a grave offense,<sup>76</sup> but he never would have done so knowingly, having taken elaborate, if futile, steps to avoid it. Therefore, he could<sup>77</sup> defend himself by saying that he did not know that Laius was his father. One can act in ignorance and still bear some blame according to Pittacus of Mytilene. He enacted a law that one be fined double for an offense committed while

<sup>70</sup> This seems to be the implication of 771–73 and of the phrase καὶ σοί, γύναι, τάληθ' ἐξερῶ (800).

<sup>71</sup> Dodds 38–41 = 66–68 ridicules the scrutiny of character, but I would argue that much of this scrutiny has been rather insufficiently focused than misdirected.

<sup>72</sup> See Knox (above, note 18) 15–16.

<sup>73</sup> He does yield once in the play, with great reluctance, at 669–72, when he spares Creon in response to the combined pleas of Jocasta and the chorus.

<sup>74</sup> Some scholars such as Winnington-Ingram (above, note 8) have tried to have an Oedipus at once arrogant (183) and innocent (203).

<sup>75</sup> Heraclitus 22 B 119 Diels-Kranz, quoted by Winnington-Ingram (above, note 8) 177.

<sup>76</sup> Hes. *Op.* 331–32, Theogn. 821–22, Aesch. *Eum.* 269–71, Ar. *Ran.* 147–50.

<sup>77</sup> As he does in Soph. *OC* 273, 547–48, 988–99.

drunk.<sup>78</sup> This law was not designed to discourage drunkenness,<sup>79</sup> or he would have outlawed wine, but rather, as Aristotle approvingly explains, because one is culpable of a crime committed in ignorance, if this ignorance arises through negligence.<sup>80</sup> Oedipus' abuse of his father is an extraordinary example of such a crime.

One would not have thought Oedipus negligent in harming his father. Indeed, his abandoning of his comfortable life in Corinth to embark upon the wandering that brought him to Thebes seems the opposite of negligence. Nevertheless, Oedipus was negligent in remaining ignorant of his father's identity, having been led into this negligence again by his impulsive character. He made the trek to Delphi to learn who his parents were and upon hearing that he was destined to defile them, he immediately abandoned the object of his journey, for the oracle manifestly did not resolve it (788–89), raising instead the separate (789) issue of parricide and incest, and set off to flee Corinth. Far from distracting him from his parents' identity as it did,<sup>81</sup> the oracle's response made it imperative that he pursue just this quest. As a distant second best, he might have contemplated a life of non-violence and celibacy<sup>82</sup> rather than murdering the first people whom he met and marrying in the first city to which he came. The failure to consult the oracle further is an essential ingredient in his downfall and shifts the blame onto his own shoulders, as is shown by Sophocles' friend (cf. Soph. fr. 5 West *IEG*) Herodotus.<sup>83</sup> Herodotus tells how Croesus, having received the oracle that if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a mighty empire, caused his own misfortune by attacking without first determining which empire was meant (Hdt. 1. 91. 4). Delphi addressed a similar rebuke in like circumstances to the children of Heracles (290 Parke–Wormell = L63 Fontenrose). While repeated consultation of an oracle might seem an improbable pestering of the god, myth records many examples of just this phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> Like that of Croesus and the Heraclids, Oedipus' ignorance results from his negligence in failing either to understand Apollo's warning or to inquire further about a question that the oracle had just shown to be crucial. In this regard, Creon is an important foil, showing constant reliance upon Delphi (603, 1442–43).

<sup>78</sup> Diog. Laert. 1. 76, Ar. *Pol.* 2. 9. 9 (= 1274b), *Rhet.* 2. 25. 7 (= 1402b).

<sup>79</sup> Pace Diog. Laert.

<sup>80</sup> Δι' ἀμέλειαν, Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3. 5. 8–9 (= 1113b–14a).

<sup>81</sup> He acts as though he knew that Polybus and Merope were undoubtedly his parents; cf. 826–27.

<sup>82</sup> Which can only with extreme latitude be characterized as "compil[ing] a handlist of all the things he must not do" (Dodds 40 = 68, quoting Waldo); it would be a short list.

<sup>83</sup> Sophocles and Herodotus shared views on many topics: e.g. *Ant.* 908–12 = Hdt. 3. 119. 6; *El.* 417–23 = Hdt. 1. 108. 1; *OC* 337–41 = Hdt. 2. 35. 2; *OT* 1528–30 = Hdt. 1. 32. 5; *El.* 62–64 = Hdt. 4. 95; *OC* 1224–27 = Hdt. 7. 46. 3–4.

<sup>84</sup> 4–5, 43–44, 94–95, 161, 216–21 Parke–Wormell = Q58A–B, Q28–29, Q146–47, Q191A–B, Q7–9 Fontenrose.

There are signs that Oedipus has not been told the truth: the scars on his feet that have always troubled him (1033) and the story of the drunk (780), which may have been widely circulated,<sup>85</sup> and which Polybus and Merope do not deny outright (783–84). Oedipus, skilled at reading signs, has to his credit noted these and feels the uncertainty of his parentage as an impairment of his intellect (786); it motivates his hundred-kilometre walk on mountain roads from Corinth to Delphi and repeatedly rears its head during his quest for the regicide (437, 779–93, 1017). He elevates his ignorance into his governing principle, acknowledging that he is “the Know-Nothing Oedipus” (397).

This man, who knows of his ignorance, acts not once but repeatedly as though he were privy even to hidden facts, treating the many phantasms of his imagination (124–25, 139–40, 380–89) as though they were manifest revelations (534–35). Likewise at the crossroads he acted—knowingly and yet as though unknowingly—in ignorance, recklessly failing to yield when it was moral and convenient to do so.

In light of these observations, we see that Oedipus is guilty of parricide as well as being an innocent victim of incest. But there is still one point to make in his favour, namely that his fate was unconditionally pre-ordained.<sup>86</sup> “Sophocles,” writes Dodds, “has provided a conclusive answer to those who suggest that Oedipus could, and therefore should, have avoided his fate. The oracle was *unconditional* . . . And what an oracle predicts is bound to happen.”<sup>87</sup>

While a conditional prediction allows for the play of free will, an unconditional prediction might be supposed to imply predestination. Even on this assumption the prediction does not exonerate Oedipus, for predestination does not, paradoxically, constitute a compulsion. Dodds knows this. His own book, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, made familiar the concept of overdetermination whereby according to early Greek thought an event may be “doubly determined, on the natural and on the supernatural plane.”<sup>88</sup> We cannot deny this overdetermined status to Oedipus’ act: He killed Laius by free choice, thereby abdicating any claim to essential moral innocence. Oedipus’ act is also determined on the supernatural plane by fate, and the Pythia says so (713),<sup>89</sup> but fate is an impersonal force, not an

<sup>85</sup> Depending upon the interpretation of the phrase ὑφείρπε γὰρ πολὺ (786).

<sup>86</sup> 148, 149 Parke–Wormell = L17, L18 Fontenrose. Wilamowitz (above, note 7) 55 = 209, Dodds 41 = 69.

<sup>87</sup> Dodds 41 = 69 (Dodds’ italics).

<sup>88</sup> *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 31. In the present context he cites, after B. M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven 1957) 39, the case of Peter, who fulfilled Jesus’ prediction that he would deny him (Matthew 26. 34, 74–75) but “did so by an act of free choice” (Dodds 43 = 71). H. D. F. Kitto, *Sophocles: Dramatist and Philosopher* (London 1958) 60 is right in saying, “there was nothing compulsory about the affair at the cross-roads.”

<sup>89</sup> Cf. [Laius] μῆριμος υἱός, Pind. *Ol.* 2. 38.

Olympian deity or even a lackey of the gods like the Furies, and it is as binding upon gods as upon mortals (cf. *Il.* 16. 433–61).

Oedipus' unsuccessful attempt to elude his fate has been attributed to hubris,<sup>90</sup> but he would have invited greater condemnation either by rushing toward Corinth in homicidal and libidinous determination to fulfil the prophecy or by quietly going about his business like some Stoic *avant la lettre*. Moreover, Socrates is not hubristic in trying to disprove Delphi's claim that he is the wisest of men,<sup>91</sup> a less than total faith in the ineluctability of the Pythia's predictions being neither unusual at Athens nor in itself evidence of impiety.

Even apart from overdetermination, Oedipus' fate does not absolve him of blame, since he could have fulfilled it in total innocence. Laius could have "died at the hand of his son" (713) and Oedipus become the "murderer" (793) of his father had he killed him accidentally, for example while hunting or playing javelin or discus (cf. e.g. *Hdt.* 1. 43, *Apollod. Bibl.* 1. 3. 3). One who kills by accident is readily called a "murderer" by a society that denies this name and the consequent legal proceedings neither to animals nor even to inanimate objects (*Arist. Ath. Pol.* 57. 4).

Furthermore, an unconditional prediction is not evidence for predestination if time for the agent making the prediction is not an abstract, inexorable forward flow. Consider this example: Suppose I videotape a group of playing children and, before playing back the tape, I state that during the play-session Mary will steal Tom's teddy-bear. My prediction is unconditional and will be brought to pass, and yet I did not compel Mary to act in this way; I may even wish that she had not done so (it has spoiled my movie). I am, in fact, incapable of imposing my will on the children or of removing theirs from them, but I can accurately predict how they will act, because I, unlike them, do not experience time as a chronometric, impersonal medium. If Apollo has a relationship to time like that in this example, he could accurately predict events without ordaining them and he could have such a relationship to time only if Time itself is a free agent, moving forward or backward, quickly or slowly, for the benefit of those whom he would help. According to the Greek conception, such was in fact the nature of Time.<sup>92</sup> In our play, Time is personified as "the All-seer" (1213).<sup>93</sup> The situation in the play is more complex than in the videotape

<sup>90</sup> J. B. Halsted, "Oedipus, in *Oedipus the King*, Commits Many Serious Errors," *CB* 55 (1979) 73–77, at 77.

<sup>91</sup> *Pl. Ap.* 21a–b (420 Parke–Wormell = H3 Fontenrose).

<sup>92</sup> J. de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca 1968) 50 writes, "Even if things are supposed to exist through all eternity and to have been decided regardless of time, it is with time and in time that they come to be. He *uncovers* them." See also P. Vivante, "On Time in Pindar," *Arethusa* 5 (1972) 107–31, who cites bibliography at 130–31, to which add A. M. Kornicki, "La notion du temps chez Pindare," *Eos* 64 (1976) 5–15.

<sup>93</sup> This is a title of Zeus (*Aesch. Eum.* 1045, *Soph. OC* 1085) and of Helios (*Aesch. PV* 91; cf. *Il.* 3. 277).

example, because Apollo does not predict the event to a disinterested third party but to the protagonist himself, and Oedipus reacts of his own free will to the god's prediction. Yet such is the nature of fate that any action that Oedipus might have taken in response to any prediction that Apollo might have made would have ended in the same result, albeit brought about by a different chain of intermediary events.

To sum up: By murdering the belligerent stranger, his superior and elder along with his retinue, including the sacred herald, while they were engaged upon official religious and state business, Oedipus violated the prerogatives of Zeus of Strangers, the respect due to superiors and elders, and the principle of fitting retaliation; he is therefore guilty of murder. He knew that he was acting in ignorance and yet behaved as though he did not know this; he is therefore guilty of father-abuse. He was fated to commit his crime, but it cannot be shown that he was compelled to do so, and certainly not in the way in which he did.

## II

What, then, of Apollo, who manifests himself in the story of Oedipus (1329)? If Oedipus had been, as the prevailing view holds, essentially morally innocent, then Apollo would have been unjust in allowing him to suffer as he does. Now that we have found Oedipus in fact responsible in some measure for some of the suffering that he incurs, the possibility arises that Apollo's actions may be just. There is no a priori reason to think that they are so; the gods of Greek myth lie, commit adultery, are gluttons. "Men find some things unjust, other things just; but in the eyes of God all things are beautiful and good and just."<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, if the actions of Sophocles' Apollo conform to an accepted definition of justice, we should admit that he at least is in that sense a just god.

We have seen that he did not compel Oedipus to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but neither did he try to prevent him from doing so, for example by giving him a straightforward answer to his question concerning his parents. The reason that he did not do so is linked, perhaps, to the fundamental difference of power between god and man. Gods cannot reveal themselves undisguised to men without destroying them;<sup>95</sup> when they appear incognito they are often recognized only at the end of the encounter and only by the extremity of their body, their feet (*Il.* 13. 71-72, *Verg. Aen.* 1. 405, etc.). This disguise-principle is intensified in connection with verbal communication. Gods have their own language and their own special

<sup>94</sup> Heraclitus 22 B 102 Diels-Kranz, quoted by Dodds 47 = 76.

<sup>95</sup> Zeus and Semele: *Pind. Ol.* 2. 25-26, *Eur. Bacch.* 6-12; Yahweh and Moses: *Exodus* 33. 18-23.

intonation.<sup>96</sup> The inevitable process of translation needed to enable them to communicate with men is complex: At Delphi when "the enquirer entered, the Pythia was already under the influence of Apollo, and was in some abnormal state of trance or ecstasy . . . [Her] answer would vary in its degree of coherence and intelligibility. When it had been given, the prophet would reduce it to some form, and dictate it to the enquirer."<sup>97</sup> The answer given by this convoluted process was perforce oblique: "The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks nor hides, but gives a sign" (Heraclitus 22 B 93 Diels-Kranz). It is scarcely surprising if the answer was not as straightforward as we would like.

Even so, Apollo does not lie to Oedipus. The cause of Oedipus' extraordinary ignorance of the events attendant upon his birth lies with Polybus and Merope. The drunk at the banquet accused Oedipus of being a supposititious child (780), but this is itself either a lie or an error, for Polybus was privy to the secret (1021). Even at the drunk's false charge the royal couple expresses anger, thereby effectively misleading Oedipus (783–84).<sup>98</sup> Later, a quick detection of the regicide is prevented by the lone survivor's mendacious description of "many robbers" (122–23).<sup>99</sup> In both cases humans, not gods, have lied.

Whether we find any justice in Apollo's actions will depend upon our definition of the term. Simonides' definition, cited by Polemarchus in Plato's *Republic*, is "giving back to each person what is owing."<sup>100</sup> So conceived, justice is wholly reactive. It requires one not to initiate any action, but only to respond in kind to the actions of others. It does not require one to help any person (by warning of impending disaster or by any other means) unless one has been helped first by him. True to the Greeks' anthropomorphic conception of the gods, this rule applies to human-god relationships just as to relationships between humans. In the *Iliad*, Apollo helps Chryses because he has roofed many temples for him (*Il.* 1. 39). In

<sup>96</sup> For their own language, see Hes. *Theog.* 831, for their own intonation, see LSJ s.v. ὄσσα and ὁμή. See also C. Watkins, "Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions," in J. Puhvel (ed.), *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans* (Berkeley 1970) 1–17, who cites bibliography at 1 nn. 1 and 2, to which add J. Clay, "The Planktai and Moly: Divine Naming and Knowing in Homer," *Hermes* 100 (1972) 127–31, J. Clay, "Demas and Aude: The Nature of Divine Transformation in Homer," *Hermes* 102 (1974) 129–36, and J. Calderón Felices, "Lengua de los dioses—lengua de los hombres," *Faventia* 4.1 (1982) 5–33.

<sup>97</sup> H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle I: The History* (Oxford 1956) 33.

<sup>98</sup> Nothing would have prevented Polybus and Merope from openly adopting a child, but, as a foundling (1026), Oedipus cannot be adopted, if Athenian laws are imagined as holding good in Corinth; hence they are forced to lie. See Harrison (above, note 17) 71.

<sup>99</sup> S. Goodhart, "Ἀγοστὰς Ἐφάσκει: Oedipus and Laius' Many Murderers," *Diacritics* 8 (1978) 55–71, esp. 56 n. 2.

<sup>100</sup> Τὸ τὰ ὀφειλόμενα ἐκάστω ἀποδιδόναι, Pl. *Resp.* 331e = Simonides 642 PMG.

the *Oresteia*, the gods punish Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra in response to their breaking of laws.

According to this conception of justice, Apollo is under no obligation to help Oedipus by warning him of the impending catastrophe, for Oedipus has performed no prior service for him. Yet, once Oedipus has offended the gods by his sacrilegious behaviour at the crossroads, Apollo is obliged to intervene and ensure that the fitting penalty of exile is enforced. He does this through the plague and the oracle to Creon (97); we can also see him at work in the fortuitous arrival of the Corinthian messenger (924) who, again by a striking pseudo-coincidence, is the very man who rescued the infant Oedipus in the first place (1022). Compassionate and comforting Apollo is not, but he is just in this all-too-human sense.

At this point, a further objection might be raised. Given that, from Oedipus' perspective, the murder of Laius is a crime justly punished by his subsequent suffering, is not the same act, when viewed from the perspective of Laius, merely an absurd suffering and, as such, evidence for the wanton cruelty of the gods that negates any other hint of divine justice in the play? When viewed from the perspective of Jocasta, does not the incestuous marriage, discovery of which provoked her suicide, also refute any claims of divine justice? I can meet this objection in two ways: First, Laius was not a wholly innocent bystander at the time of his murder, having actually provoked Oedipus to strike. Second, the suffering of Laius and Jocasta may be construed as punishment for an earlier crime of their own: that in which he "yoked" the feet of the infant Oedipus (718) and she gave the child to a herdsman to kill (1173-74).<sup>101</sup>

Opinion is divided over whether newborns were commonly exposed in fifth-century Athens.<sup>102</sup> Even if they were, it would be rare to treat a healthy, legitimate, first-born son like Oedipus in this way.<sup>103</sup> Exposure did

<sup>101</sup> H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*<sup>2</sup> (Berkeley 1983) 121 likewise believes that Laius must deserve his suffering, yet his own solution (that the suffering is provoked by Laius' rape of Chrysippus) violates Aristarchus' rule, "what is not mentioned in the play does not exist," and so is less economical than the view proposed here.

<sup>102</sup> A. Cameron, "The Exposure of Children and Greek Ethics," *CR* 46 (1932) 105-14 and W. V. Harris, "The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World," *CQ* 32 (1982) 114-16 hold that exposure was common; M. Golden, "Demography and the Exposure of Girls at Athens," *Phoenix* 35 (1981) 316-31 holds that the exposure of girls was common; L. R. van Hook, "The Exposure of Infants at Athens," *TAPA* 51 (1920) 134-45, H. Bolkestein, "The Exposure of Children at Athens and the ἐγχυτρίστριαι," *CP* 17 (1922) 222-39, D. Engels, "The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Greco-Roman World," *CP* 75 (1980) 112-20, and C. Patterson, "'Not Worth the Rearing': The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece," *TAPA* 115 (1985) 103-23, are far more sceptical about the frequency of exposure of children of either sex.

<sup>103</sup> Health: Patterson (previous note) 113-14; legitimacy: *ibid.* 115-16; primogeniture: Cameron (previous note) 106 (cf. Pl. *Theat.* 161c); maleness: Golden (previous note) *passim*. Tyro in one of Sophocles' plays of that name exposed her twins because they were illegitimate. It would of course be rare in real life, if not unparalleled in



not constitute homicide, firstly because the newborn was not a legal person until its adoption into the family during the naming festival, which took place on about the tenth day of life<sup>104</sup> and an unwanted child would be exposed before this time, Oedipus, for example, at three days (717–18), and secondly because the parent did not actually kill the child. Yet, while not criminal, the act was open to moral censure: Oedipus blames his parents for hurting him knowingly, while he committed his crimes in ignorance (Soph. *OC* 273, 547–48, 988–99); the servant saved him out of pity (1178) and Jocasta, thinking of the exposure, calls him “wretched” (855).<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, Oedipus’ was no ordinary exposure. Ordinary exposure is not necessarily lethal, thrusting the newborn from the family only, not necessarily from life. All children exposed in myth<sup>106</sup> and, presumably, many in real life were saved and reared as foundlings,<sup>107</sup> for the parents, callous enough to abandon their child, scruple actually to shed its blood. By contrast, Laius and Jocasta, intending actually to kill their son, left him on a trackless mountain (719) where the hope of rescue was slight and took the unprecedented step of maiming him, which both weakened him and made it unlikely that he would be rescued even if found. We note the symmetrical justice in the adult Oedipus’ causing the deaths in fact of the parents who tried to kill him as an infant.

### III

Recognition that Oedipus’ guilt and Apollo’s justice are greater than is usually allowed for affects how we understand what—if any—is Sophocles’ message. Sophocles’ gods, like those of Aeschylus, are just in an obvious human sense. It is no longer true, on the basis of this play at least, to speak of “the incomprehensible ways of the divine will” or to hold that “one must not bring in false concepts of human morality involving good and evil.”<sup>108</sup> These are precisely the concepts necessary to understand Apollo’s role in Oedipus’ suffering. It is even less true to say that “what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty

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legend (cf. Paris: Apollod. *Bibl.* 3. 12. 5), that a child should be prophesied to kill his father (Soph. *OT* 712–13).

<sup>104</sup> N. J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford 1974) 231–34 and Patterson (above, note 102) 105–06.

<sup>105</sup> Golden (above, note 102) 331; cf. Pl. *Theat.* 161a.

<sup>106</sup> On exposure as a motif in myth, see G. Murray, “Ritual Elements in the New Comedy,” *CQ* 37 (1943) 46–54 and D. B. Redford, “The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child,” *Numen* 14 (1967) 209–28.

<sup>107</sup> ὀρεπτοί, Patterson (above, note 102) 121–22.

<sup>108</sup> “Die unerforschlichen Wege des göttlichen Willens”; “man darf nicht durch gut und böse falsche Begriffe menschlicher Sitlichkeit hineinragen,” Wilamowitz (above, note 7) 56 = 210.

to the truth."<sup>109</sup> This is only "[t]he immediate cause"<sup>110</sup> of his ruin and the Greeks are far more sensitive than we to ultimate causes, abounding as their myths do in nativities, inventors, aetiologies and even an original sin or two.<sup>111</sup> This is especially true in a legal context: For example, in Plato's *Apology* (18a-b) Socrates identifies and refutes his "former accusers." Oedipus is himself an aficionado of ultimate causes, beginning with confident relish (132) the seemingly hopeless investigation into the regicide and extrapolating from Teiresias' claim that he, Oedipus, has committed parricide and incest not only an alleged proximate cause (Teiresias has been bribed to say this) but also a putative distant cause (Creon bribed him because he wants the kingship [380-89]). We must never forget the ultimate cause of Oedipus' ruin—the murder at the crossroads come back after all these years (613, 1213) to haunt him.

The profound differences between Aeschylus and Sophocles are not theological and it is difficult to agree with those who find in the god who tells Orestes, "you *must* kill your mother"<sup>112</sup> a kinder, gentler Apollo than the god who tells Oedipus, "you *will* kill your father." What is new—and far from comforting—in Sophocles is his assessment, gloomy even by Greek standards, of the limits of human knowledge. The ignorance of Sophoclean characters runs through a broad spectrum: Oedipus mistakes his parents for strangers, homecoming for exile and hereditary kingship for unconstitutional rule; Creon in *Antigone* twice mistakes the priorities of the living for those of the dead;<sup>113</sup> Deianira mistakes a poison for a love-potion; and Ajax mistakes a sheep for Agamemnon. In Sophocles humans deceive one another<sup>114</sup> and people act with a self-confidence unwarranted by their feeble grasp of reality. Only once does a god deceive: Athena in *Ajax* (51-52), and her deception, motivated by retribution (762-77), prevents a crime from being committed. It is in his anthropology rather than his theology that the uncompromising quality of Sophocles' world consists.

The function of art, according to Dodds, quoting Dr. Johnson, is "the enlargement of our sensibility."<sup>115</sup> This phrase is perhaps too broad to

<sup>109</sup> Dodds 43 = 71.

<sup>110</sup> Dodds 43 = 71.

<sup>111</sup> Nativities: Pind. *Ol.* 1. 26-27, 6. 39-47, 7. 35-38, *Nem.* 1. 35-47; inventors: Pind. *Ol.* 1. 40-45, 7. 42, 13. 17-22, *Pyth.* 2. 32, 4. 217, 12. 6-8 and see A. Kleingünther, "Πρώτος Εὑρετής," *Philologus* Suppl. 26 (1933) and K. Thraede, "Das Lob des Erfinders: Bemerkungen zur Analyse der Heuremata-Kataloge," *Rh. Mus.* 105 (1962) 158-86; παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων (Aesch. *Ag.* 223). See B. A. van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past* (Leiden 1953) 122.

<sup>112</sup> Aesch. *Cho.* 269-96, 900-02, 953-56, 1029-30, *Eum.* 798-99.

<sup>113</sup> Firstly at *Ant.* 773-80, 1068-71; secondly at 1192-1205.

<sup>114</sup> *Aj.* 646-92, *Trach.* 249-90, 569-77, *El.* 680-763, *Phil.* 343-90.

<sup>115</sup> Dodds 45, 49 = 74, 77. This curious doctrine of enlarged sensibility was no mere temporary aberration of Dodds' thought, for he had enunciated it years before in *Euripides. Bacchae* (Oxford 1944) xliii = 2nd ed. (1960) xlvii. Dodds does not specify the source of this quotation, but David Sansone has most plausibly suggested to me that it is an

capture the specific virtue of tragic drama. The virtue of tragedy lies elsewhere, in a region suggested by the examination question set by Dodds for his undergraduates, namely, in adding understanding to our spontaneous emotional response, in order to assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men.

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inaccurate quotation from memory of Johnson's *Life of Waller* §139: "From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy."